

Barbara Mikulski

1936–



Image courtesy of the Member

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE, 1977–1987

UNITED STATES SENATOR, 1987–

DEMOCRAT FROM MARYLAND

CONSIDERED THE “GODMOTHER OF WOMEN IN POLITICS,” Baltimore social activist, U.S. Representative, and U.S. Senator Barbara Mikulski is the longest-serving woman in Congress today. During her 29 years in Congress, Mikulski has brought the fighting instincts from her roots as a Baltimore social activist to a host of national issues ranging from women’s health to care for veterans and the elderly to the stewardship of the environment. “Like most of the women I’ve known in politics,” she said, “I got involved because I saw a community in need.”¹

Barbara Ann Mikulski was born on July 20, 1936, in Baltimore, Maryland, to William and Christine Mikulski. She graduated from Mount Saint Agnes College in Baltimore with a degree in social work in 1958, subsequently working as a caseworker for Associated Catholic Charities and Baltimore’s department of social services. After earning an M.S.W. from the University of Maryland in 1965, she organized opposition to the construction of a highway in an East Baltimore historic district. The grass-roots campaign propelled Mikulski onto the city council of Baltimore, where she served from 1971 to 1976. During the 1972 presidential campaign she was a special adviser to the Democratic vice presidential candidate, R. Sargent Shriver. Afterward she chaired the Democratic Party’s Commission on Delegate Selection and Party Structure.²

Mikulski already was known statewide when, in 1976, she campaigned for the Baltimore-based House seat vacated by Representative Paul Sarbanes. She won 75 percent of the vote in the heavily Democratic district and was never seriously challenged in her four House re-election campaigns, winning by margins of 74 percent or greater.³

Mikulski became the first woman to serve on the powerful Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce (now the Energy and Commerce Committee), a post she held for her entire House career. Mikulski’s work on that panel earned her the reputation of being a strong consumer and environmental advocate.

She backed a bill which forced chemical companies to clean up toxic waste sites and supported a law requiring used-car dealers to disclose a vehicle's history.⁴ Mikulski also served on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, an important position for her port city constituency. She became a voice for aid organizations. In the early 1980s, she obtained a "good guy" bonus, which allowed hospitals that legitimately cut costs to be spared cuts in Medicaid funding.⁵ A lifelong advocate of women's rights, Mikulski also was a key founding member of the Congresswomen's Caucus in 1977.

In 1986, when Maryland's Senator Charles Mathias retired, Mikulski entered the race for his seat. She defeated her primary opponents, Maryland Governor Harry Hughes and House colleague Michael Barnes, with more votes than both her opponents' combined. Mikulski won with 61 percent of the vote in the general election. She was re-elected three times with large margins in 1992, 1998, and 2004, becoming the first Maryland politician to garner more than 1 million votes in 1992.⁶ Mikulski received assignments on four committees: Appropriations, Labor and Human Resources (renamed Health, Education, Labor and Pensions), Small Business, and the Select Committee on Intelligence. In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), when Democrats briefly controlled the Chamber, Mikulski chaired the Labor Subcommittee on Aging and the Appropriations Subcommittee on the VA, HUD, and Independent Agencies. From 1994 to 2004, she served as Secretary of the Democratic Caucus, the third-highest-ranking position in the Democratic leadership.

The ability to sustain a legislative agenda ensured Senator Mikulski some major legislative triumphs, including the 1988 Spousal Impoverishment Act, which allowed a husband or wife to retain assets if Medicaid paid for the other spouse's nursing home costs. Mikulski also has been a leader in women's health issues, overseeing the creation of the Office of Research on Women's Health at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1991 and helping to double NIH funding for women's medical research. Mikulski also backed the 2000 Breast and Cervical Cancer Prevention Act. She is a leading supporter of scientific inquiry and space exploration and has led the fight to fund major National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) initiatives as well as the fight to double funding for the National Science Foundation. After the 2001 terrorist attacks, Senator Mikulski supported the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and increased the Federal Emergency Management Agency's fire grant program—providing equipment and protective gear to first responders—from \$150 to \$745 million annually.⁷ A master of parliamentary procedure, Senator Mikulski also serves as a mentor to her women colleagues, who have tripled in number since the early 1990s.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Barbara Ann Mikulski," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

Mikulski, Barbara, et al. *Nine and Counting: The Women of the Senate* (New York: Morrow, 2000).

NOTES

- 1 Barbara Mikulski et al. *Nine and Counting* (New York: Morrow, 2000): 118.
- 2 *Current Biography*, 1985 (New York: H.W. Wilson and Company, 1985): 292–295; "Democratic Reformer," 22 September 1973, *New York Times*: A15.
- 3 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 4 *Politics in America*, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1983): 663–664.
- 5 *Politics in America*, 1984: 663.
- 6 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 7 "Official Biography of Barbara Mikulski," <http://mikulski.senate.gov/SenatorMikulski/biography.html> (accessed 13 September 2002); *Politics in America*, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 458–459.